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THE PEONS OF THE SOUTH.

That cotton raising on small holdings, as now carried on in the South, has economic disadvantages against which the farmer finds it difficult to struggle, may be true; but the situation of the farmer can not be understood nor the direction of its improvement indicated until the non-essential conditions under which he lives are taken into account, especially the sort of peonage under which he is held by the merchant.

Before the civil war the agricultural land of the South was owned and cultivated in large areas by white planters who were wealthy and independent. Their purchases and sales were made through agents and brokers whose accounts showed balances in favor of the planters sufficient to meet all purchases made in their behalf and all drafts made by them for cash. When a planter wanted sugar, coffee, clothing for slaves and other supplies that could not be produced on the plantation, they were bought by the agent and their cost charged against the balance in his hands remaining from sales of cotton or other products. It rested with the planter to decide how much cotton he would raise, and, if he had preferred to abandon cotton for other products, no one was in a situation to prevent him from doing so. He made bacon and raised corn, but not so much as he should have done, and, as far as he could economically and conveniently do so, he produced other supplies. His plantation was an independent little principality, on which the small economies were attended to, and these were of considerable importance. The slaves kept the various implements in repair, did the work of blacksmiths and carpenters, pruned and grafted in the orchards, and guarded the poultry from hawks and foxes; their labor, in numerous directions, was superintended intelligently and effectively and with a view to prevent waste, losses and idleness.

A devastating and exhausting war, in which nearly all of the able-bodied white men of the South were engaged on one side, made an immediate and radical change in the agricultural system of that region. The planters, their sons, the "poor whites," and their comrades of other descriptions, returned from the camp, in poverty, worn out, dispirited, hopeless of the future and dazed with the collapse of their dream. Their old home surroundings were gone and they must create such new ones as were permitted by expediency and the limited means at command. Their first concern was food and the strict necessities of life, which they must produce or borrow from those who had not lost all of their wealth and credit. Large plantations could not be cultivated as of yore for want of equipment, and a subdivision into tenancies was the only course. The ex-slaves were still there, unprovided, as many of their former masters were, with food sufficient to last until the harvesting of the next year's crops. Freed from their bondage to the soil, many of the freedmen drifted to the towns, which they had not been allowed to frequent before.

So it happened that tenant farming largely replaced the old system. Farmers who owned the farms that they cultivated and landlords alike had to obtain from merchants the supplies of food, clothing and farm equipment that were needed, and these on credit, giving in return pledges of the crop to come, out of which the debts must be paid. The tenants, even less prepared to choose, adopted the same system and lived on their interest in the future crop.

The merchants then took the helm. Such crops as they could most readily market must be produced under their orders, regardless of the fact that they might not be the ones most advantageous to their debtors. The kind of crop that best accorded with this requirement in the cotton regions was cotton, and it was demanded in quantities proportionate to the indebtedness that was allowed to accumulate. The sale of the cotton, too, was taken charge of by the merchants,

and as the system in this respect was much like that which prevailed before the war, its necessity was readily accepted by the farm owners; but now the balance of the account was with the merchant and agent. His cry for cotton and more cotton, to keep pace with the indebtedness, has led to so enormous an increase in the production of this fibre since the war that the North, ignorant of the real situation, has pointed to it as an evidence of the superiority of the free, over the slave, labor of the blacks. But the situation is not misunderstood in the South. The merchants, who advance plantation supplies, have replaced the former masters and have made peons of them and of their former slaves.

Every crop of cotton is mostly consumed before it is harvested, and after the harvest the farm owner or tenant has to place a lien on the next year's crop, often before the seed goes into the ground. These liens bear high rates of interest, regardless of usury laws, because the supplies are advanced at excessive prices. The road to wealth in the South, outside of the cities and apart from manufactures, is "merchandising." It is the general opinion in many counties where inquiries have been made, that the interest and profit on crop liens amount to not less than 25 per cent yearly of the capital advanced, that the common proportion is from 40 to 80 per cent and that even 200 per cent is exacted in some places. Doubtless an unusual degree of risk may warrant a charge therefor in the rate of interest; but the rates much more than cover this and effectually transfer the farmers' profit to the pocket of the merchant. Hence the farmer finds himself in that oft-mentioned situation between the upper and the nether millstone. He has lost his independence, and the cotton raising that is forced upon him by his creditor, supplemented by his own unwillingness to raise anything in addition to cotton, makes it impossible for him to regain his independence.

This being the state of affairs the agricultural land of the cotton States has little sale. Merchants will not accept it as

security for debt unless they are compelled to do so when crop, mules, cattle and other personal property are insufficient. This is one reason why mortgages on Southern farm land are so few. Only 3.38 per cent of the farms of Georgia, cultivated by owners, were mortgaged in 1890, and only 8 per cent in South Carolina, while in Iowa the proportion was 53.29 per cent; in Maine, 22.09 per cent; in Maryland, 30.01 per cent; in Massachusetts, 30.46 per cent; in Montana, 15.58 per cent; in Wisconsin, 42.85 per cent; and in New Jersey, 48.91 per cent. Georgia's and South Carolina's small percentages tell a story of unfortunate conditions to those who are familiar with the reasons for their smallness.

The farm tenant does not rise to ownership in the South, because, as his affairs are managed, he can not acquire ownership. Generally speaking, it is probable that he owes more than he owns, and what he owns is of little value—hardly worth taxing. In this region, where he can build his own dwelling of logs and where land can be bought for a very few dollars an acre, about half of the farms are hired and the proportion is increasing. Such an effect indicates the badness of the case more than pages of description could do. In Georgia 58.10 per cent of the farms were hired in 1890, an increase of 13.25 in the percentage since 1880; in South Carolina the percentage has increased from 50.31 to 61.49. The system of peonage, at least to a great extent, is immediately responsible for this, but it may be that there is escape from it for tenants who are exceptionally industrious and saving. It is more easy for the cultivating farm owners and for the landlords.

The white farmers of the cotton States are "in a rut," in which they are kept by the persistence of the habits and customs which developed out of the necessities that followed the war. They have no good excuse for buying their bacon and some of their corn year after year, as they are doing. They can produce and make much that they now purchase and can exercise a better supervision over their

tenants. They can restore many of the small economies that were practiced before the war. Indeed, it is to the system that then prevailed that they must and can return in a large degree, as far as consistent with the thirteenth amendment to the Constitution. Some of them have done so and their old-time independence has been restored.

One of the best known cotton planters of Georgia returned from the war a young man with no possessions but the clothing on his body. He bought land entirely on credit, received advancements of supplies from a merchant, also entirely on credit, and prepared to raise a crop of cotton. In the meantime, being a man of exceptional force of character, he was faithful as far as possible, to the system that prevailed on his father's plantation before the war, and he at once began to produce on his own plantation the supplies needed thereon. His supervision was excellent and it prevented waste, enforced economy and secured repairs. It may everywhere be observed that the more thriving farmers are those who are constantly guarding against outgoes that are charges against their crops. They live mostly on the direct and indirect products of their farm, they produce fertilizers instead of buying them, they do rough carpenter's work, repair their implements and other articles of equipment, and so maintain a high degree of independence except in relation to the purchasers of their crops. This was the policy pursued by the Georgia planter referred to above, with the result that in two or three years he was able to begin to reduce the mortgage on his farm and eventually to pay it in full.

The prices of cotton in later years have made such an achievement of slower accomplishment, but not impossible. It is only by following such a course that the cotton planter and landlord can emancipate themselves from their peonage to the merchant. Once let them reach a position where they can defy him and resist his demand for cotton, they can check its over-production, diversify their agriculture,

pay more attention to the rearing of domestic animals and to the raising of fruits and vegetables, at the same time aiming to master a specialty. It is most unwise for a farmer to put all his eggs into one basket. With one product he may thrive for a time, but, in the long run, under present competition, he should have many reliances, one of which may be a specialty, if it is wisely selected.

Doubtless the Southern planters can not escape from their enthrallment to cotton without much effort, but there are assurances that, where this effort has been made, it promises success, if it has not already won success. It would seem as if no great effort were required from a cotton farmer to make it unnecessary for him to buy cabbages at fifteen cents apiece, Irish potatoes at \$1.50 a bushel, and hay at \$20 a ton, which he was not long ago seen to do in Arkansas, although he had land that would produce cabbages and two crops of clover and potatoes in a year. Nor need he pay \$10 for a barrel of flour that cost the merchant \$3, and \$1 a bushel for corn that cost forty cents, as he was doing in a certain Georgia town last summer, although he could raise both wheat and corn.

On the Southern farm there is a neglect and a want of thrift which are a burden in themselves. The farmer is not ready to lift a hand to delay the dilapidation of his buildings. The plow is left at the end of the last furrow until the next year; a few nails or screws would save dollars of loss or of eventual credit with the merchant, in scores of places. What shall be said of farmers who have no gardens? And yet gardens are rarely seen on Southern farms, although the South is peculiarly the clime for them. Such has been the subjection of the cotton planter to his unthrifty habits and to the system, of which the merchant is king, that not until very recent years did the product of corn in the cotton States exceed that of 1850.

But the black tenant has more to overcome. He too is living on the next crop, but he operates on so small a scale

on his one-mule or two-mule holding that his net product of wealth gives him no more than a poor subsistence. The tenant system, as now managed, is economically inferior to the previous slave system, and, while he did not get a due share of the products of his labor as a slave, he gets even less now, because he receives a share of the incidence of the comparative economic loss. As a slave he was better fed and better housed than he now is, he had the best medical attendance in the county, and, if he was disposed to neglect his master's interests, which would have been his own as well, had he been free, he was restrained. Now he is almost as helpless as a child, and is still as thoughtless of the morrow. The merchant who has a lien on his share of the crop pays his taxes, buries his wife or child, buys him a mule if he needs one, and feeds and clothes him and his family to the extent that his improvidence and laziness are allowed credit. The high prices that the tenant pays for supplies are partly due to his untrustworthiness; not infrequently he is missing, after his living has been advanced to him until it is time to pick cotton, or he carries off cotton in the night without accounting for it to the merchant.

The first step in the tenants' elevation now consists in their producing their own food and, as far as possible, other supplies, which are now mostly a charge against their share of the crop. They may then have a margin for saving, if they are economical, and it is only with this that they can elevate themselves to farm ownership and give themselves the independence that was their vision at their emancipation. That any considerable number of them will ever do this is not believed in the South.

The blacks prefer a tenancy to selling their labor for wages, and in some regions, at least, the white owners who cultivate their farms find that only the inferior laborers can be hired, because the superior ones prefer tenancies. As the planters become independent of merchants, they are unfriendly to these tenancies, but, in some instances, have

to grant very small ones, in order to hold the services of the blacks, who, under such circumstances work for wages during a part of the year on the plantation cultivated by their landlord. If the white landlords arrive at independence from debt before the black tenants do, as it may be assumed that they will, if either class is to improve, it seems likely that the blacks will see a service for wages encroaching upon the tenant system.

Some of the more hopeful and thriving of the cotton planters believe that progress will be made by the plantation owners out of the present bad state of affairs in the direction which, in a general way, has been indicated ; but a contrary opinion is held by some observers who are familiar with the data of the problem. The plantation owners, most of whom are landlords, often live in towns, having abandoned their plantations to irresponsible tenants who care to work only indifferently and for a bare subsistence of the poorest sort. A tenant whose crop by chance more than suffices to meet his obligations, will pick enough cotton to discharge his debts to the landlord and the merchant and abandon the remainder, knowing that he can live on the next crop until it is harvested. There is complaint that the blacks and the poor whites can not be controlled to secure efficient service and economical production. At any rate, the owners make little effort to control them and leave the merchants to drive them away from their stores and the towns, where they are loafing, when they should be working, by threats of cutting off their supplies.

When plantation owners are asked why they do not make bacon, the frequent answer is that it is discouraging to struggle against hog cholera and that it is cheaper to buy bacon. Energetic efforts to suppress the disease are wanting and there seems to be a nursing of the spirit of helplessness. The objection is also advanced that hogs will stray away because fences are wanting, and that under the tenant system fences can not be built. Although this is true the

obstacle is not too great to be overcome by an industrious farm landlord, who will make a beginning by cultivating a portion of his farm, instead of leaving it all to tenants. That a movement in this direction has been made is indicated by the increased production of corn in very recent years.

Customs that have prevailed in the South since early times still prevent an adaptation of the owners of plantations to the radically changed conditions consequent upon the war. Their traditions forbid them to work. Had they been reared among the surroundings and customs of the Northern farmers, they would long ago have recovered from the disasters of the war by making their plantations provide most of their subsistence; by their own labor and thrifty supervision they would have diversified agriculture, gone into fruit culture and stock raising and emancipated themselves from peonage to merchants and slavery to cotton. It would have required a sacrifice of sentiment and the traditional standing of a "gentleman" for some time to have achieved these results, but it must now be realized that the loss would have been insubstantial and temporary, while the gain would have been fundamental and permanent.

It is deeply to be regretted that custom and sentiment, at this late day, should be preventing a regeneration of Southern agriculture, and the regret would be still greater if there were to be a considerable immigration of foreign agriculturists. The South, with its weak economic instincts, is peculiarly a prosperous region for those in whom these instincts are active, especially if their style of living is simple and cheap. If German, Polish, Bohemian and Swedish agriculturists were to invade the South in large numbers, they would dispossess the plantation owners by their industry and economy. They were born to work and to save. Already the process has begun in Texas, where large plantations are passing piecemeal into the hands of these people, and where in a few years the purchasers are entirely out of debt.

There is no doubt that the plantation owners can work out their own salvation, if they will, in spite of the low quality of labor that they must hire. The question is whether they have the will to do so, whether long custom and tradition have not so incrustated them that they have lost their adaptability. From the tenants little can be expected. Most of them are so wanting in the instincts on which their rise from the kind of peonage under which they live depends, that they will not do better than they are doing.

It rests with the plantation owners to determine whether the South shall escape from the thralldom of the crop lien. Southern farming, both large and small, needs to shun the storekeeper as much as it can. When the supplies for farm and family are derived mostly from the farm itself, it is apparent that the charges against the cotton crop will be reduced, a margin for saving established and that peonage will be abolished. After this has been done cotton production can not be forced upon the farmer and he can begin the diversification of agricultural products and branch out into stock raising, truck farming, fruit culture and other occupations according to his opportunities and his markets. The ills of the farmers are not going to be cured by legislation; "our remedies oft in ourselves do lie, which we ascribe to heaven."

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